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Real men don't have to eat quiche to know their way around a kitchen. In fact, some may even be in danger of getting dishpan hands, if you believe the latest trends in advertising. Thanks to a prevalence of two-income marriages and a little creative bravado from some ad agency copywriters, more men finally are helping out at home - at least in commercials.

They stack dishes in the dishwasher for Cascade. They fret over their baby's diaper rash for Johnson & Johnson. And they whip up a nutritionally balanced meal in minutes for Kraft General Foods. And, somehow, despite such drudgery, these men manage to keep their manly good looks.

"Finally, people in advertising offices are recognizing that men's position, willingly or unwillingly, is changing," said Ray Brown, a professor emeritus of pop culture at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

"They (men) are staying home more, participating in the everyday lives of their family and taking on some of the functions women have had in the past."

Like potty training, for instance.

A Fruit of the Loom commercial shows a father rewarding his toddler son's first successful trip to the toilet by giving him a pair of briefs, his first Fruit of the Looms. Triumphant, the two walk down the darkened hallway toward the light.

"There was a real rite of passage in the spot that, in some ways, can only be passed on between a father and a son," said David Selby, senior vice president of the Leo Burnett Co. ad agency in Chicago, creator of the ads.

"It's a reflection of what goes on in households millions of times a day."

But is it really?

A 1990 Gallup poll showed that in 62 percent of households surveyed, women did most the dusting, vacuuming and cleaning; men did in only 3 percent of the cases. And in 87 percent of the homes, women did most of the laundry, compared with only 1 percent of homes where men washed the clothes. (The numbers don't add to 100 percent because some couples said both or neither did those chores.)

Another perception: A 1992 Playboy survey indicated that 58 percent of its male readers said they bought groceries the previous weekend. The reality: Progressive Grocer, the food retailers' bible, found that 81 percent of regular grocery shoppers are women.

So, do ads showing homemaking hubbies work?

"It's a little bit of reality and a little bit of fantasy," said Judith Langer, owner of Langer & Associates, a New York consumer research firm.

"There has been a change in men's roles," she said.

"More are involved in the home. But many studies still show that the primary responsibility for child care and inside, household domestic duties is held by women."

Nevertheless, those ads appeal to men because they support many men's perception that they do their fair share at home, Langer said. Quipped Brown at Bowling Green, "Last night I saw a man in the kitchen, but maybe he was just passing through."

The ads also appeal to women, Langer said, because women can hope they come true. Added Selby at Leo Burnett, "We're trying to appeal to both men and women. Women are the gatekeepers of the family and the primary purchasers of all clothing."

And apparently women like to see men share diaper duty.

In a recent Johnson's baby powder print ad, a proud young father boasts: "They say all babies get rashes. I say, Not my baby." In another Johnson & Johnson commercial, a father expertly washes his baby daughter's hair, producing no tears.

"Fathers these days are more and more involved in every aspect of caring for a child. Our advertisements are a reflection of that," said Jeffrey Leebaw, a Johnson & Johnson spokesman.

These fictional fathers even know how to cook - without a charcoal grill.

Check out the Kraft macaroni and cheese spot in which a husband and wife quickly split the kid-shuttling duties, then can't figure out who will get dinner on the table. Dad volunteers. In seemingly no time, a piping hot and hearty-looking mac-and-cheese mixture is on the table.

"The fact is, more fathers are involved in everyday meal planning," said Patricia Shafer, a spokeswoman for Kraft. "It's a credible representation of what real lifestyles are about today."

If it is a reality, then the advertising world has managed to overlook it for years.

Historically, men's roles in advertising have been as stereotypical and cliched as women's. Until the 1980s, it seemed that all men could do is flex their pecs, race their cars and close business deals. Occasionally, for recreation, they drank beer, played sports and attracted women. On life's frontier, the ads seemed to say, only the Marlboro Man reigned.

The '80s produced the Sensitive Man - the guy who discussed his baby daughter over a Heineken with a friend, the men who nurtured friendships while looking casually fashionable in Dockers slacks.

That period was short-lived. The romantic, reflective guy in the blurry cologne ads is once again overpowered by images of beefy, silent types prancing through Brut commercials claiming, "Men are Back."

Ask a man whether he'd rather be Michael Bolton or Clint Eastwood, and eight out of 10 will say they prefer the steely eyed outlaw over the syrupy soul singer, according to Yankelovich Partners, a New York consumer research firm.

But when men become fathers, it's not Clint Eastwood they aspire to be but Robert Young, Langer said.

That is why in previous ads, fathers maintained a kind of "Father Knows Best" distance from domestic issues. They doled out wisdom about life, sports and business to their children. They drove minivans for safety. They paid for college.

They did not do diapers.

"You didn't see the kind of nurturing and fathering that is the mainstream now," Selby said.

Langer added that men today "feel they missed out because their fathers were unengaged (with family matters). They try to think they are better than their fathers."

Modern Mr. Moms may seem like gentle souls, but they're not sissies. Or, at least, they don't look like sissies.

In the Fruit of the Loom spots, the father has a hunky, athletic build. In a recent Simmons Beauty Rest magazine ad, a well-developed, bare-chested dad cradles his baby.

The message: The '90s man clearly has to be strong yet gentle, handsome yet handy with a spatula.

Langer put it this way: "You want your guy to take out the garbage, even though you've never seen Clint Eastwood do it."